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CANCEL THIS CONQUISTADOR

The South still commemorates Hernando de Soto.
Instead, it should hold up another Spaniard.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

IT HAPPENED ON AN ALABAMA SUMMER morning. About a decade ago, off US Route 11. Somewhere between Gadsden and Mentone, during my first time in the state.

My wife and I were on the lookout for antiques. We enjoyed getting lost in northeast Alabama's charming towns, all seemingly carved into hills. Our drives on steep, winding roads frequently slowed to crawls as we tried to absorb every mile of giant green trees, which filtered the sun like a kaleidoscope.

Our native Southern California was the farthest thing from our minds for hours—until we came across a jarring reminder of home.

A giant billboard featured a cartoon Spanish conquistador.

He was smiling. Bushy mustache and goatee. Wearing armor, a helmet, and striped pantaloons, the stereotypical uniform of medieval Spaniards in the American imagination. I can't remember what he was trying to sell us, but Google Maps told me we were near DeSoto State Park. As in Hernando de Soto, the first European to travel through what's now the American South.

American historians and civic leaders long hailed

the Spaniards who marched through the Americas from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries as brave men who navigated a strange new land in the name of civilization and Christ. Their names continue to adorn schools, streets, cities, parks, businesses, and beaches across the United States, especially in the states where they set foot.

Out in California, the most commemorated conquistadors are Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, Juan Bautista de Anza, Gaspar de Portolá, and Saint Junípero Serra, the Franciscan missionary who arrived in their wake to establish missions throughout the state.

In the South, it's almost exclusively de Soto.

After I realized how close we were to his eponymous state park, the billboard made more sense. But I was still flummoxed. When I got to our hotel room, I Googled "Spanish conquistadors South," because I just couldn't understand why the region would continue to celebrate a Spanish past that rarely, if ever, figures into its modern-day collective identity.

I soon discovered that parts of the South remember de Soto with a public veneration that approaches mania.

A native of the Extremadura region of Spain, de Soto was cruel even by the standards of his era. He helped to conquer Central America and became a slave trader there. His cunning earned him an assignment in Peru, where he had a hand in taking down the Incan Empire. He returned to Spain a wealthy man, but was sent back to the so-called New World and asked to conquer North America for the Spanish crown. De Soto and his troops landed at what's now Tampa Bay on the Gulf Coast of present-day Florida in 1539.

Archaeologists and historians dispute the party's exact path from there, but we know that de Soto died in 1542 and was buried in the Mississippi River. And we know that, for centuries afterwards, his exploits in the South weren't forgotten. In fact, they were commemorated.

Every Southern state except Virginia claims a part of de Soto, whether by place names or trail markers. Cities and counties assumed de Soto's first or last name starting in the 1800s. Historical plaques bloomed in 1939 and 1940 along his putative route in the wake of the United States De Soto Expedition Commission, which sought to celebrate "the first and most imposing expedition ever made by Europeans into the wilds of North America" on occasion of its 400th anniversary.

Celebrations continue to this day. There's the De Soto Heritage Festival in Bradenton, Florida, a city near where the conquistador originally landed, complete with a parade and a grand ball where men dress like the caricature I saw on that billboard. At Desoto Caverns near Birmingham, the mascot for years went by Happy Hernando, a costumed employee who wandered around the park and took pictures with children as if he were Mickey Mouse at Disneyland.

Even we in California never went that far.

There are still monuments dedicated to our conquistadors, and their names are still prominent parts of the California landscape. But the days of hailing them as heroes are long gone. Protestors tore down statutes of Serra in public spaces

across the Golden State in 2020, while cities and churches preemptively removed them. Everyone expects the State Legislature to eventually yank a statue of the saint that has stood at the United States Capitol's National Statuary Hall since 1931.

Following recent changes to the state's curriculum, California schools now teach students that those Spaniards from centuries ago, long respected by previous generations as heroes, were nothing more than men who massacred Indigenous people, took their lands, enslaved the survivors, and ostracized their culture.

The de Soto billboard encounter has stayed with me all this time, but I especially thought about it over the last two years, as the United States has experienced a reckoning over how we remember our past and whom we choose to venerate with public monuments and namesake buildings.

A reverence for de Soto is unbecoming of the South, especially since his own chroniclers described his expedition as blazing a path that left thousands of Native Americans dead and introduced diseases that would kill off even more. Why bother with a guy like that when living, breathing Latinos are imparting a far more substantial cultural imprint than the Spanish interlopers from so long ago?

Besides, there's another Spaniard from the Age of Exploration who's a far

better candidate for the South to honor.

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was a member of the 1528 Pánfilo de Narváez expedition, which sought to settle what is now Florida on behalf of the Spanish crown. The 300-plus group made landfall that spring, only to find disaster wherever they went as they sailed along the Gulf Coast and up to the mouth of the Mississippi River. Four years later, Cabeza de Vaca was just one of four survivors of the original brigade—and he was at the mercy of various Gulf tribes that traded him like tender.

When Cabeza de Vaca encountered other Spaniards eight years later in what is now northern Mexico, the Native Americans who accompanied him refused to believe he was from the same

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country as the conquistadors. By then, Cabeza de Vaca was no longer a slave. He freely traveled among tribes as a healer. He took the time to learn the languages, customs, and ways of life of the people he encountered. He had become a part of their society, rather than trying to subjugate them like his fellow Spaniards.

“We healed the sick, they killed the sound,” he wrote in memoirs that still make for a gripping read centuries later. “We came naked and barefoot, they clothed, horsed, and lanced; we coveted nothing but gave whatever we were given, while they robbed whomever they found and bestowed nothing on anyone.”

Of that encounter in present-day Mexico,

Cabeza de Vaca said that he and the Natives who were with him came from the sunrise, while the Spaniards came from the sunset. While it’s no doubt a simplification of a complex reality, it’s a compelling metaphor: Native folks are cast as people who greet possibility and light, while the Spaniards brought darkness to the lands they captured.

But Cabeza de Vaca’s insight also speaks to the moment we live in today. A new dawn is rising across the country, offering a different way to think about our history. We should hold up the Cabeza de Vacas as people who, even centuries ago, showed us a different way of how to live.

Meanwhile, may the de Sotos of yore go with the dusk. 🍷

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